

Behind the South American Stories

Chatty Letters During a Journey From Aruba to Rio

During the past seven months, journalist Hunter S. Thompson has been roaming through South America. His informative dispatches on social, economic, and political conditions there have been appearing in *The National Observer*.

But there's another side to reporting that seldom shows up in formal dispatches—the personal experiences of the digging, inquisitive newsman. These often give fascinating insights on the land and the people. Witness these excerpts from Mr. Thompson's personal letters to his editor in Washington.

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Aruba.

I am leaving by smuggling boat for Colombia in a few hours and am rushing to get this off before I go. [Article on Aruba, *The National Observer*, July 16.] It is probably too late and too long for you, but I hope not, because I think it is a good and valid look at island politics, personalities, etc.

In about three days I plan to be in Barranquilla, Colombia. After Barran, I plan to go up the Magdalena River to Bogota, thence to Peru in time for the June 10 elections. But this is tentative.

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Bogota, Colombia.

Here is a sort of offbeat travel piece that might interest you [Article on Guajira, *The National Observer*, Aug. 6]. In Aruba, they are probably announcing the election results right about now and I imagine there are a lot of people digging holes in the bleak Aruba landscape.

If you can think of anything else you might want, let me know. By the time I get to Ecuador I will have seen most of Colombia at close range. If nothing else, I will have a lot of photos and, hopefully, an immunity to dysentery, which is now on me in full force.

The Valencia piece [Article on Colombia, *The National Observer*, June 24] will be in the mail tomorrow if they will stop ringing these bells—a mad clanging every five or ten minutes. Sometimes it goes on for 20, and bounces me around the hotel room the whole while. Between the dysentery, the bells, and the unceasing loudspeakers in the street I am half-mad. (Ah, here go the bells again.) Ten minutes of it now; a lunatic in the belfry and worms in the stomach. What a town!

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Call, Colombia.

My figures sent earlier on the price of Colombian coffee on the world market are correct, but not nearly as dramatic as the following: Ninety cents a pound in 1954, 39 cents a pound in 1962. As I said, Colombia depends on coffee for 77 per cent of its export earnings.

Incidentally, Colombia gets another 15 per cent of its export earnings from petroleum. That leaves 8 per cent as a base to begin "diversifying" with. Not much, eh? Some good minds are just about at the end of their tether with the problem.

While I'm talking here, the Alliance for



Hunter S. Thompson

An oasis on a Latin American odyssey, La Paz, Bolivia, is a modern city of 350,000 people situated 12,000 feet above sea level.

Progress thing is a toughie, because most of the hard-nose opposition to it is sulky and silent. In a lot of cases, the Alliance faces a problem not unlike that of trying to convince Jay Gould that he is not acting in the best interests of his country.

Incidentally, Rojas Pinilla is without doubt the only dictator whose name is in the phone book in the capital city over which he once held sway. He lives in the best section of Bogota.

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Call, Colombia.

There is an alarming tendency (in Colombia, anyway) to view the problems of the local economies as essentially a thing for the Alliance to deal with. Almost like, "Thank God, Big Brother has finally come to the rescue—let him handle it." This is, of course, a generalization, but there is a lot of truth in it.

Another ominous note is the attitude of a lot of American businessmen I have talked to—"Sure, we'd like to help, but business is business, you know." And everything they say makes sense on at least one level: Fears of arbitrary government price controls, expropriation, mounting labor difficulties, and the risks of long-term investments vs. the near-certainty of the short.

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Quito, Ecuador.

The sun is shining in Quito, the mountains are green and sparkling around the town, and my mind is running in high gear.

Most everything I have to say, how-

ever, revolves in one way or another around questions of money. There seems to be a universal impression that I am on some sort of Divine Dole, and the theory that I often require money in order to make money has not gained wide acceptance: I trust you have sufficient background in Personal Economics to grasp the full meaning of this.

I could toss in a few hair-raising stories about what happens to poor Yanquis who eat cheap food, or the fact that I caught a bad cold in Bogota because my hotel didn't have hot water, but that would only depress us both. As it is, I am traveling at least half on gall. But in the course of these travels I have discovered that gall is not always the best currency, and there are times when I would be far better off with the other kind.

I am throwing this thing in your lap though I don't expect anyone to agree—at a distance of several thousand miles—with my certain knowledge that I am a paragon of wisdom, courage, decency, and visionary talent. On the other hand, I am working on my fourth case of dysentery, my stomach feels like a tree is growing in it, and I am medically forbidden to touch so much as a single beer.

Well, this is the longest letter I've written since I was in the Air Force and was sending love letters to a girl in Tallahassee. I don't expect you to be altogether happy with this one, but then the girl wasn't always happy with hers, either, and we both survived.

Ah, it is noon now, check-out time, and I can hear the clang of the cash register across the patio as they rack up another

\$7 to Senor Thompson, the gringo with the messy room.

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Guayaquil, Ecuador.

Things are not going well here, my man. I limped in Saturday night after a spine-cracking train ride, and on Sunday discovered to my horror that the president and all the Guayaquil money men are leaving Wednesday for Washington. For this reason I am having a time seeing anyone—or at least the right people.

Aside from that problem, I am beset by other forms of plague. One, I have not had any word from my New York secretary in two weeks so I have no idea how I stand at the bank. Thus I am afraid to cash a check. The first time I bounce one down here I might as well give up and go back to the States.

The moneyed community on this continent, which is what you have to deal with when you want to cash checks, is like Melville's circle of Genius—which "all over the world stands hand in hand, and 'one shock of recognition runs the whole circle round.'" Which means, in my case, that if I bounce a check in Call my reputation as a crook will precede me to Buenos Aires. So I have to be careful.

Optimism is a rare commodity here, and the daily harassments of life in Guayaquil are just about as much as a man should have to bear.

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Guayaquil, Ecuador.

This is to confirm my not particularly pointed observations during yesterday's phone call, which I appreciated a whale



Writer Hunter Thompson

of a lot and all the more because I suspect you did it primarily to keep me from feeding myself to the giant turtles.

Now I feel better in the head, if not in the stomach. On Monday I will fly to Lima. I could go before that but Saturday and Sunday are holidays and we just finished a five-day lull having to do with Ecuadorian history. These holidays are maddening; every time you turn around they are rolling down the store fronts and locking the offices. That, in addition to a noon to 4 p.m. lunch hour, makes work just about impossible.

I understand that while I was in Quito my secretary told you I was in Talara, Peru. I think the New York summer has affected her reason. Just for the record, I have never been near Talara and will do everything in my power to avoid it in the future.

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Lima, Peru.

I have a good peg on Peru. It may seem like heresy in Washington, but it is a fact that democracy is just about as popular here as eating live goldfish. I tell you now so you'll have time to ponder. (Some B&W's has been throwing rocks at my window all night and if I hadn't sold my pistol I'd whip up the blinds and crank off a few rounds at his



feet. As it is, all I can do is gripe to the desk.) The street outside is full of thugs, all drunk on pisco. In my weakened condition I am not about to go out there and tackle them like Joe Palooka.

It is all I can do to swing out of bed in the mornings and stumble to the shower, which has come to be my only pleasure. I am beginning to look like the portrait of Dorian Gray; pretty soon I am going to have to have the mirrors taken out.

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Lima, Peru.

First, I want to assure you that I exist. There is at present 171 pounds of me—down from 189 in Aruba—and just about the same weight in luggage spread out around this room. I am barred once again from touching even a single beer, any fried foods, spices, pepper, and just about everything else except broiled meat and mineral water.

(Now this hotel doesn't have any more mineral water—How long, O Lord, how long?)

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La Paz, Bolivia.

I blew in yesterday in unholy shape. This awful spate of pain and sickness puts the fear of God in a man. The latest was the sting of a poison insect in Cuzco, paralyzing my leg as if I'd been hit by a 50-pound sting-ray. Anyway, after two visits to the clinic, much cortisone, many infra-red lamps, and the inevitable drink-prohibiting antibiotics I was at least able to walk with a cane fashioned out of one of the legs of my camera tripod. That is the state I am in now. I hobble around La Paz like a vet from the Indian wars, averaging about 100 yards an hour on the flats and more like a turtle on the hills.

At the end of this week there will be no electricity in La Paz. Now it is rationed to the point where the United States Embassy, for one, has elevator service only every other day. This means I have to go up five flights of stairs on one leg, so I have been impressed with the gravity of the situation.

They work it so that every section of the city gets a turn at having electricity. So on some days you have hot water, elevators, lights, etc., and on some days you don't. If the electricity goes off completely, however, I may have to flee. It is bad enough having to walk up the stairs on the cane, without having lights or hot water when I get here. Or heat, I might add; and La Paz is cold as Christmas.

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Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

I've been trying to get off a letter for about a week now, but have been hopping across jungle and Matto Grosso, touring oil camps, and spending all my money on antibiotics.

I figure, though, that every week I've spent in these countries is a week I won't have to spend the next time I go back. An investment, as it were, and now that I've survived this much of the thing I think I'd be kicking myself right now if I'd just skimmed through.

I definitely mean to base here—for a while, anyway. It is about time I lived like a human being for a change.

—HUNTER S. THOMPSON



THE OBSERVER

SCRAPBOOK



New Year

New Year is probably the oldest festival celebrated by man; it is also the most universal.

Southern mountaineers fire off shotguns at mid-

This Week in History

Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation Jan. 1, 1863. (Preliminary proclamation was made Sept. 22, 1862.)

Beware of the Month

Beware the January month: Beware those hurtful days, that keenly piercing air Which flays the steers; when wide o'er fell and flood Ice in its curdled masses nips the blood.

—Hesiod, *Works and Days*, Eighth Century B.C.